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An eye-catching detail, this accessory is not something you just throw on — so what are politicians such as the AfD's Alice Weidel trying to tell us?



Alice Weidel sporting a pocket square in Berlin last month © Getty Images

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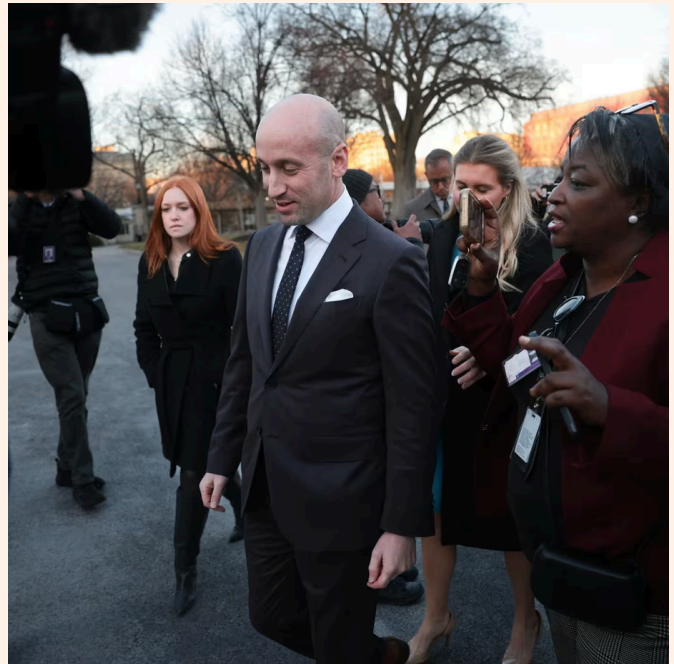
Alice Weidel, the co-leader of Germany's far-right Alternative for Germany party, took to the stage at the close of last month's national elections in Berlin wearing a minimal navy suit, a plain white shirt and a pocket square in sky-blue silk. The party had won favour with one in five voters, the crowd was chanting "Alice für Deutschland!" and, cresting out of the top pocket of an otherwise unremarkable suit, it was an eye-catching detail.

Weidel wears them a lot, as does her co-leader Tino Chrupalla. In neighbouring Austria, Herbert Kickl, leader of the far-right Freedom party, can often be seen with a skinny pocket square demarcating a straight white line across the chest of his suit.

In the US, Stephen Miller, the White House deputy chief of staff for policy credited with driving Trump's hardline stance on immigration, regularly wears one. Pete Hegseth, the Fox News host turned secretary of defence, frequently accents his suit with a stars and stripes pocket square to match his Old Glory socks and belt. And Tucker Carlson, the former Fox News host who has been accused of using his platform to amplify a white supremacist ideology, [famously wears a peaked pocket square](#).



Former Fox News host Tucker Carlson... © Bloomberg



...and Stephen Miller, deputy White House chief of staff for policy, are both pocket-square fans © Getty Images

What politicians wear matters — it reveals, and it tries to hide; it attempts to communicate and obfuscate. And the pocket square is prime real estate. Lauren A Rothman, a DC-based image coach and style strategist who works with politicians across the party spectrum, describes the body as the road map, the clothes as the GPS. The pocket square, she says, is a directional tool, “to bring us up to eye-level, to keep us engaged.

“It’s always been more than just an accessory. It’s a signal, right?” says Rothman. “In classic menswear that signal historically spoke to refinement, attention to detail.” It is the perfect spot for political pageantry: on the breast, in full view of cameras and crowds. Perhaps that is why political lobbyist [Roger Stone](#) is such a devotee.

Old-school and formal, pocket squares are by no means limited to the far right, conservatives and their sympathisers. Joe Biden can be chalked up as a fan. Even Barack Obama wears them on occasion.



US defence secretary Pete Hegseth wearing a stars and stripes square in Warsaw last month © Bloomberg

But the wearer shifts the meaning and, in the context of rightwing politics, pocket squares feel differently charged. “It is a visual shorthand for nostalgia, privilege, tradition, exclusion in some cases,” says Rothman. “So yes, it can be loaded.”

Katja Hoyer, a German-British historian and journalist, has noticed the style of these right-leaning politicians “seems to hark back to a different era . . . it’s almost like a pointer to a more traditional time.” She sees the pocket squares as part of this “sense of nostalgia for a world that seems to have vanished and lots of their voters presumably want back”. Cynthia Miller-Idriss, a sociologist at American University in Washington who has written a [book](#) examining how extremist ideologies have entered mainstream German culture through clothing, thinks “it definitely conveys a message of traditionalism” and is “[a] nod to an era that they want to celebrate and return to, some kind of utopian ideal”.

The pocket square’s smartness and formality fits with a long history of rightwing dressing. And in cases involving extreme or unsavoury views, offers a veneer of respectability. Miller-Idriss references a call put out to attendees of a white supremacist rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, in 2017, with “deliberate instructions to appear looking well-dressed. That’s why they all showed up in khakis and ironed polo shirts.” She points also to rightwing political commentator Richard B Spencer, who popularised the term “alternative right” and is often dressed smartly, every hair crusted neatly into place, “who deliberately wore suits and ties and smart-looking clothing in order to obscure or confuse or disrupt”.

Because, she says, “if Americans had in their heads a kind of image of white supremacists [with] shaved heads and bomber jackets and combat boots”, then the smartness of dress might make the ideas seem more palatable, because the package they come in looks safer and less threatening. Or, as Miller-Idriss puts it: “It doesn’t carry that kind of whiff of violence.”



Jean-Marie Le Pen, the then leader of France's Front National (now the Rassemblement National), with the party's current leader, his daughter Marine, in 2006 © AFP via Getty Images

In the case of Weidel in particular, it feels as if the pocket square, something she has admittedly worn for years, is doing a lot of talking. The relative flamboyance of hers compared, for instance, with Chrupalla's, which are more geometric, make them reminiscent of the billowing handkerchiefs of that other pocket-square wearer and forefather of the far right in modern-day Europe, Jean-Marie Le Pen. For Rothman they “are a deliberate styling choice. And, whether consciously or not, she is echoing figures like [Le Pen].”

Hoyer proffers that while Weidel sees herself as more conservative libertarian than far right, she is aware “that a lot of the vote comes from there”.

Whether any of this is done deliberately is impossible to say. But the pocket square — curated and deliberate — isn't just something you throw on.

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